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THE LONGER NARRATIVE POEMS OF AMERICA

1775-1875

Side by side with the development of prose fiction in the United States in the century which began with our struggle for independence, has run a series of fiction in verse. The fondness for romance in the earlier part of the nineteenth century, and the tendency toward sentimental piety in the fifties and sixties, as well as the movement in the direction of realism which was the distinguishing feature of the novels and short stories of the second half of the century, are all reflected in the narrative poems of America. But there have always been factors which have drawn some writers aside from following the prevailing style in fiction, and have consequently obscured somewhat the general development. On the whole, poetry is apt to be more imitative than prose, and a fashion set by a Byron or a Scott persists far beyond that set by a Godwin or a Dickens. Poetry, too, has always been considered a little farther away from actual life than prose; hence when novelists, beginning to realize the possibilities of romance in the scenes and the people at their doors, are writing of their own times and of their own country, state, and town, the writers of narrative verse are still seeking subjects for their stories in far-distant lands, and in ages long past. The tendency toward romance, therefore, was longer-lived in the verse-stories of America than in her prose, especially in the work of the vast company of poorer versifiers, many of whom, in the apparently firm conviction of the value to the world of the article they had for sale, burst into print without a publisher, probably after a vain search for one imbued with the same faith as themselves. The better poets yielded more readily to the influence of realism, but even they clung to some extent to the old fields for poetry, and used subjects to be found in mediæval story or oriental romance.

The poets whose influence was stronger on the writers of narrative verse in America, were, in the order of their popularity as models, Scott, Byron, Homer and Vergil and Milton (for these three must be mentioned in the same breath), Mrs.

Browning, and, to a much less degree, Robert Browning. America's earlier poets were still in the grip of the eighteenth-century classicism, and they composed ponderous epics on Biblical subjects, on slavery, on the history of America, on the career of Napoleon, boldly stating on the title-page that they were imitating the *Iliad*, or modestly claiming in the preface kinship with the Miltonic Muse. The earliest of these epics is *The Conquest of Canaan*, by Timothy Dwight, which appeared in 1785, although it was written as early as 1774. In spite of the rhymed couplets in which it is written, the influence of Milton is perfectly evident, in subject-matter, treatment, style, and diction. The decade before 1785 had seen many ballads and short narrative poems on the subject of the events of the Revolution, which because of their brevity do not concern us here, except as showing the beginnings of patriotic poetry. To a recognition of the popularity of such poems was due the apology in the preface to *The Conquest of Canaan*: "It may perhaps be thought the result of inattention or ignorance that he [the author] chose a subject, in which his countrymen had no national interest. But he remarked that the *Iliad* and *Æneid* were as agreeable to modern nations as to the Greeks and Romans."

Twenty years later, Thomas Branagan chose a subject which was of national interest. The battle against slavery was already being waged, and the story of a slave might well have been thought of as timely. "*Avenia*; or, A Tragical Poem, on the Oppression of the Human Species, and Infringement on the Rights of Man. In Six Books, with Notes Explanatory and Miscellaneous. Written in Imitation of Homer's *Iliad*," was published in 1805. The first two lines,—

Awake, my muse, the sweet Columbian strain,
Depict the wars on Afric's crimson plain,—

are an indication of the Homeric combats that follow between traders and future slaves, and prepare one for the heroics of the heroine, Avenia, a slave, who drowns herself in despair after calling upon Jove for aid. The muse again awoke the "sweet Columbian strain" two years later in another poem entitled,

"*The Penitential Tyrant; or Slave Trader Reformed: a Pathetic Poem, in Four Cantos.*" In 1808, Congress prohibited the slave trade, but not, I fear, as a result of these two poems.

Religious poems on the model of *Paradise Lost* were also written, such as *The Gospel Tragedy*, an "Epic Poem in Four Books," published anonymously in 1795, and *The Process and Empire of Christ*, by Elhanan Winchester, 1805.

In 1807 appeared a more important poem on a truly national subject, *The Columbiad*, by Joel Barlow. In true epic fashion he begins,—

I sing the Mariner who first unfurled
An eastern banner o'er the western world.

In ten books of heroic couplets he tells of the visit of Hesper, the Spirit of the West, to Columbus, as he lay in prison, and of the vision of the future history of America and progress of mankind which he brought to him, closing with a "view of a general Congress from all nations, assembled to establish the political harmony" of the human race. The moral purpose of the poem Barlow expresses in the Preface. "The real object," he says, ". . . . is to inculcate the love of rational liberty, and to discountenance the deleterious passion for violence and war; to show that on the basis of republican principle, all good morals, as well as good government and hopes of permanent peace, must be founded; and to convince the student in political science that the theoretical question of the future advancement of human society, till states as well as individuals arrive at universal civilization, is held in dispute and still unsettled only because we have had too little experience of organized liberty in the government of nations to have well considered its effects."

Among the later poems which had the classics or Milton for their models was *The Adventures of Daniel Boone*, by Daniel Bryan, which appeared in 1813, an epic which begins with a description of the evolving of order out of chaos, and of a council of Seraphs on the Alleghany Mountains, one of whom, Enterprize, carries to Boone the commission to explore and settle Kentucky. The opening lines show Bryan's model:—

When first their dark and yet untravel'd rounds
Through the inane expanse of pristine Night,
The planetary conglobulations roll'd.

The Napolead, by Thomas H. Genin, was written the year after Waterloo, although it was not published until 1833. *The Course of Time*, an epic relating the history of the world from the Creation to the Last Judgment, was the work of Robert Pollock about 1827, but it was put by for more than the Horatian period, and evidently thought likely to gain readers in 1864, when it was given to the world. Three years before this, appeared a Miltonic poem describing the other world, entitled *The Shadowy Land*, by Rev. Gurdon Huntington, A.M.

The next strong influence on American poetry was that of Scott, and poems modelled on the *Lay of the Last Minstrel*, the *Lady of the Lake*, and *Marmion*, were written on all conceivable subjects. Scott's manner was a favorite one for Indian stories, and copper-colored heroes strutted around with all the airs of a Fitz-James, and talked in language befitting a border chieftain. But before the serious poems imitating the manner of Scott had begun to appear, James K. Paulding had made use of his power of parody in *The Lay of the Scottish Fiddle*, published in 1814. This was "A Poem, in Five Cantos. Supposed to be written by W— S—." The parody is perfectly obvious from the first:—

The way was long, though 'twas not cold,
But the poor bard was weak and old,
And carried, scor'd upon his front,
Of many a year the long account.
His Fiddle, sole remaining pride,
Hung dangling down his ragged side.

The orphan boy is replaced by a "little dog with gentle speed," but we recognize an old friend under a new name in "keen Childe Cockburn, good at need." The parody is close enough to be amusing at first, but grows wearisome after a while, as most long parodies do. The same writer was responsible also for a poem entitled *Jokeby*, and George Colman, Jr., used another of Scott's romances as the model for his parody, *The Lady of the Wreck*. From this time down to the middle of the century, there was a succession of poems in the style of Scott, most of them based on Indian stories. Of his own *Mogg Megone*, written in 1834, Whittier said in after years, "Looking at it, at the present time, it suggests the idea of a big Indian in his war-paint

strutting about in Sir Walter Scott's plaid." The most important of these poems are *Yamoyden*, a tale of the wars of King Philip, by James W. Eastburn and Robert C. Sands, 1820; *Ensenore*, a story of the Indian raid on Schenectady, by P. Hamilton Myers, 1840; *Powhatan*, by Seba Smith, 1841; *Tecumseh*, by George H. Colton, 1842; and *Frontenac*, by A. B. Street, 1849, one of the best of these tales. The form of the Scott romances, as well as the style and manner, had taken strong hold on the versifiers of the second quarter of the century, and the canto had replaced the long "book" of the Miltonic epics. Peter Parley, in his *Recollections of a Lifetime*, speaks of the fact that his sister had *The Lady of the Lake* by heart, and that all the young poets were inoculated with the octosyllabic verse.

During all this time, however, Scott had to run a close race for popular favor with Byron. The Byronic hero crossed the ocean, and together with the Scottish chieftain, put on blanket and wampum. Indeed, sometimes they got mixed up with each other in the same poem, and a tale with a Byronic hero, told in the manner of Scott, is common enough. The characteristics which we commonly associate with the Corsair or the Giaour are even transferred to a woman, as in *Zethe*, by E. D. Kennicott, 1837. The *Metrical Romances* had their effect in producing a great number of poems dealing with the adventures of Italian countesses and Greek pirates, the best examples of which are those of Mrs. E. Anne Lewis, *Zenel*, *Florence*, *Isabelle*, and *The Child of the Sea*. A quotation from the first of these will serve as an illustration of them all, and of almost innumerable others of their type, and will avoid wearisome repetition. It might with perfect fitness have been taken from *Guido* by Emma C. Embury, 1869, from *Felicita*, by Elizabeth C. Kinney, 1855, or from *The Rivals of Este*, by James G. and Mary E. Brooks, 1829, but it happens to be found in *Zenel*. It is noticeable that many of these poems are by women. This is the kind of hero that appealed to the "female poets of America" of those days:—

Upon his lofty brow yet age
But lightly pressed its signet sage;
Still there were marks of inward care

And grief full many a character—
 A melancholy of the eye
 And mien, when there was no one nigh,
 That told some treasured, hidden wo
 Was gnawing at the heart below. . . .
 His form was cast in stately mould,
 And high his brow, and full, and bold;
 His long locks curly, glistening,
 And sable as the raven's wing,
 Were flowing 'neath the ebon hood
 That decks the Greek of noble blood. . . .
 One well might deem he had been made
 For else than ocean's renegade,
 The blackest fiend that ever soared
 The watery waste, or stained a sword.

Beppo and *Don Juan* also had their influence, marked in a number of poems which combined with their narrative much social satire, expressed in the stanzaic forms which Byron had made popular, with attempts at imitation of his clever rhymes, and his sudden changes in mood. None of his followers had either the genius or the bitter cynicism of their master, so that their poems lacked both the consummate cleverness and the ill savor of their models. Of *Fanny*, by Fitz Greene Halleck, one of the best of these imitations, Lowell spoke as—

a pseudo Don Juan,
 With the wickedness out that gave salt to the true one.

This was published in 1819, the same year that *Don Juan* first appeared, and shows some traces of acquaintance with that poem, although, as Halleck himself said, the initial impulse came from *Beppo*, which had seen the light two years before. *Fanny* is a domestic satire of a family of the *nouveaux riches* of New York. Many years later George Lunt wrote a Byronic satire on Boston life, called *Julia*, and in the Preface expressed his opinion that "one great duty of a poet, is, to exhibit social follies, vanities and vices, in their true light." Many other poems showed the influence of Byron in style and form, in the ejaculatory manner, with the dash and the exclamation point as the chief marks of punctuation, and in the *Don Juan* stanza, with its temptation to indulge in unusual rhymes.¹

¹ For a full discussion of the influence of Byron on American poets, see William Ellery Channing Leonard, *Byron and Byronism in America*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1905.

About the middle of the century there crept into the narrative verse that same tone of sentimental piety that produced in prose such novels as *The Wide, Wide World*. A little later it was combined with the form rendered popular by the appearance of Mrs. Browning's *Aurora Leigh* in 1856. The "novel in verse" joined hands on the one side with this sentimental tendency, and on the other with the new effort after realism. The result was a number of long poems, which filled entire volumes, telling stories of American domestic life, or those connected with American history, often divided into chapters instead of cantos or books. J. G. Holland is one of the most representative poets of this group. His first poem, *Bitter-Sweet*, was published in 1863. It is in dialogue form, though not at all dramatic, and tells, by means of conversation, the stories of various members of a large New England family, at the same time offering an answer to the age-long problem of the existence of evil in the world. It contains much sentiment, but also shows much power, and it is a story of real, simple people. His next poem, *The Mistress of the Manse*, 1867, one of the best narratives of the Civil War, is far more free from sentiment. In *Kathrina: Her Life and Mine*, 1869, it appears again, but in a poem distinguished by its character drawing and its remarkably easy conversation, expressed in smooth blank verse. In 1865 appeared *Daisy Swain*, a tale of the Civil War, disfigured by sentiment and by poor verse as well, but offering an excellent example of the novel in verse. Sentiment pure and unalloyed, with no trace of realism, is the distinguishing feature of *Gron-dalla, a Romance in Verse*, by "Idamore," 1866, a story of misunderstanding in love due to the plots of scheming parents, of sons cast out from their fathers' doors, of reconciliations and of divine vengeance on the villain. The next year saw the publication of *Alice, or the Painter's Story*, which was said by its author, Laughton Osborn, to belong "to that class of fiction (i.e., the novel), although it is in meter." John M. Dagnall used for his novel, *The Mexican; or Love and Land*, 1868, which is divided into chapters, the invasion of Maximilian. The tropics furnish the scene, the problem of the taint of negro blood the theme, for *The Guardian*, by Francis L. Vinton, 1869. *The*

Woman Who Dared, by Epes Sargent, 1870, deals with the problems of free love and with the "new woman," as she appeared in those days.

Bowring did not have any number of imitators in this country. He challenged admiration, but not rivalry. William Wetmore Story came closest to him in psychological analysis in his *Dramatic Monologues and Narratives*, whose very titles, *Guinevra da Siena*, *Giannone*, *The Confessional*, suggest the work of the master of the dramatic monologue.

In thus reviewing the main streams of foreign literary influence on American narrative verse, many poems have necessarily been omitted. There were some other writers whose style or form appears to have affected only one, or, at most, two poets. Such, for instance, is the case with Coleridge; the spell of his *Ancient Mariner* reappears only in Richard Henry Dana's *Buccaneer*, 1827, and that of his *Christabel* many years later in the serpent-woman of Thomas Buchanan Read's *House by the Sea*, 1856. Southey's style was evidently the model for Maria Gowan Brooks's *Zophiel*, 1825-1829. More important, however, in the quality of the resulting poems, was the influence of the older masters, Boccaccio and Chaucer, in determining the form of Longfellow's *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, and Whittier's *Tent on the Beach*. Lowell also planned a similar group of stories, to be called *The Noonning*, but *Fitz Adams' Story* is the only portion of it that was published.

In the three decades between 1845 and the end of our period, much original work was done in narrative verse. As we advance in these thirty years, a marked increase in the number of poems of permanent value is perceptible, as well as a broadening of their scope. In the first ten years, only two poems of importance appeared, Longfellow's *Evangeline* in 1847, and Lowell's *Vision of Sir Launfal* in the next year. The beginning of the next decade, however, was rich in promise and achievement. Longfellow's *Hiawatha*, Bayard Taylor's oriental romances, and Read's *New Pastoral* were all published in 1855, of which the last belonged to an entirely new field. He followed this the next year by *The House by the Sea*, and in the next by *Sylvia; or the Last Shepherd*. *The Courtship of Miles Standish*,

by Longfellow, appeared in 1858, and was the last notable narrative poem for several years. With the preliminaries and first year of the Civil War past, the poets renewed their activity. In 1862 Read published his *Wagoner of the Alleghanies*, a good story of the Revolution, in stirring verse. In the next year came *Bitter-Sweet, Tales of a Wayside Inn, Part I*, and Stoddard's *King's Bell*. In 1864 Stedman's *Alice of Monmouth* began the series of poems called forth by the war. The next year his example was followed by Read in his *Summer Story*, as well as by the author of *Daisy Swain*. Taylor's *Picture of St. John* also was published in the same year. As time passed, the activity died down a little, though in 1867 appeared another good Civil War story, Holland's *Mistress of the Manse* and also *The Tent on the Beach*. In 1869 Stedman offered to the world his *Blameless Prince* and Holland his *Kathrina*. But the impetus that seemed to have been given to narrative verse by the war had passed away, and there was a lapse of three years before anything of much value was written. Then, in 1872, the second part of the *Tales of a Wayside Inn* was published, and in the following year, the third part. To this year also belongs Taylor's *Lars*, an essay in a comparatively untried field. In 1874, another poem on a Scandinavian subject appeared, *Thurid*, by G. Edward Otis. In 1874 also was published Trowbridge's *Emigrant's Story*, and in 1875, Joaquin Miller's *Ship in the Desert*.

Among all these poems there are some types that persist throughout a great part of the period and show more or less growth and development. American narrative verse is markedly national. Of all the poems that have been considered in preparation for this paper, at least half are concerned with American subjects. If the enormous number of short patriotic ballads which do not come within the scope of this discussion were to be added to the list, the scales would sink immediately on the American side. There are some poems whose scene is left absolutely vague; there are religious epics whose stage is the whole sidereal universe or the Other World; there are a number the action of which takes place in the Orient, either in Biblical or more recent times; and there are a fairly large number of

poems with a European background. Of the most important of these I have spoken elsewhere, for most of them were written under the influence of some other poet. Italy and the Mediterranean provided the setting for the narratives of the admirers of Byron. The call of mediæval Europe was answered by many poets both good and bad. Lowell, in his *Vision of Sir Launfal* and *Legend of Brittany* was approaching the old "miracle" type of story. In good stirring verse, Philip Pendleton Cooke revived some of the old Froissart tales, and added others of his own, constructed along the same lines. Stedman wrote a mediæval romance, *The Blameless Prince*, and in the *Prelude* made his apology for turning to the past for material:—

Poet, wherefore hither bring
 Old romance, while others sing
 Sweeter idyls of to-day?
 Why not picture in your lay
 Western woods and waters grand,
 Clouds and skies of this fair land?
 Are there fairer far away?

Trust me, in the land I view
 Falls the sunshine, falls the dew,
 And the Spring and Summer come.

Why from yonder stubble glean
 Ancient names of King and Queen?

Nay, but they were human too.

But, on the whole, American poets have written American stories, and one and all, the earlier ones blatantly, the later ones with a more delicate note, they sound the praise of their native land. "Who," asks Daniel Bryan in the preface to his poem on the *Adventures of Daniel Boone*, "who can ramble through Columbia's forests, hear the roar of her rivers, gaze on the grandeur of her mountains, and muse on her glorious Liberties, without breaking forth into the rhapsodies of divinest enthusiasm? Yet how few there are in this section of her Republic [Virginia], who have ventured to resound in verse the praise of her charms, or the honors of her distinguish'd Sons! A thousand times has the Author beheld in Fancy, the Genius of Columbian Poesy standing on the wildest cliffs of Allegany, tuning the tear-twinkling chords of her Lyre, and warbling at intervals,

unheeded, the sweetest raptures of Inspiration; while the wasted strains, thrown from hill to hill, sunk and expired in the tenderest murmurs of neglect!" This lament was made in 1823, and the two topics suggested here were to form the subject-matter for most of the narrative poetry of the future, "the praise of her charms, and the honors of her distinguish'd Sons." Six years before, Barlow's *Columbiad* had sounded the glories of America in broad and general terms, a suitable beginning of patriotic poetry. It seems strange that the adventures of the great Discoverer of our continent did not furnish material for more romances. I know of only one other within our period, *The Island Bride*, by James F. Colman, 1846, a poor tale of one of the companions of Columbus and his deserted Indian wife. Here too the historic setting is merely the background for the romance, and is not used for its own sake. But in many other poems founded upon events in the history of America, the reverse is the case. Frequently the author explains in the preface that his narrative is merely the thread on which he hangs the description of the scenery, or the portrayal of the manner and customs of the people about whom he is writing. This is the case in *The Backwoodsman*, by James K. Paulding, 1818, the story of which is very slight, merely the adventures of a family of settlers, and is intended, as the author himself states, to serve the purpose of introducing in an easy and natural way, a greater variety of scenery than would otherwise have been possible. The same is true of *The Burning of Schenectady*, by A. B. Street, 1842, which, according to the Preface, is "principally descriptive." Some poems are distinctly attached to a certain locality, and are written obviously for the sake of describing it, rather than for the purpose of telling a story or of commemorating an event. Such is *Passaic*, by Thomas Ward, 1842, a group of five tales the action of which took place on or near the river of that name. Thomas Buchanan Read's *New Pastoral*, 1855, is another of the same type. Without the definiteness of location which a poem like *Passaic* possesses, its purpose is to give a picture of that West into which the persons of his story, a little band of emigrants from a simple Pennsylvania village, were pushing. Very like this is *The Emigrant's Story*, by J. Townsend Trowbridge,

1874, and in the next year Joaquin Miller published his *Ship in the Desert*, a long narrative of life in Arizona, in the preface of which, addressed to his parents, he wrote, "You will pardon the thread of fiction on which I have strung these scenes and descriptions of a mighty land of mystery and wild and savage grandeur, for the world will have its way, and like a spoiled child, demands a tale."

The events of the history of the American continent supplied plentiful material to satisfy this craving. Longfellow, in *Evangeline*, 1847, and *The Courtship of Miles Standish*, 1858, reverted to the early days of the French and English settlers, and the explorations of Boone, as we have already seen, held the attention of another Daniel. The wars in which this country has engaged have given rise to poems and stories founded on the incidents in them. The numerous ballads produced during and after the Revolution should be mentioned here, although they are too short to be included in my list. Probably the best known of those shorter poems on Revolutionary subjects is *Paul Revere's Ride*, which was the first of the *Tales of a Wayside Inn*. Only two long poems connected with our struggle for independence are of any moment, William J. Grayson's *Marion*, 1856, and Read's *Wagoner of the Alleghanies*, 1862. Grayson was born in South Carolina, and, like other Southerners, such as Simms, was eager to tell of the exploits of his hero. It was an opportunity for romance of which it seems strange that more and better poets did not take advantage. Read's poem is one of the best of the narrative poems produced in America. It is a stirring story of a loyalist and his "rebel" daughter, well told, with a complication of incident which maintains the interest to the very last.

Our second war with England also had very little result in a literary way. An anonymous poem, *The Heroes of the Lake*, 1814, has Lake Erie for the scene, and introduces Logan as one of its characters. This was the hey-day of the influence of Scott and Byron, so it is not surprising that John Neal's *Battle of Niagara*, which appeared in 1818, shows traces of both English poets in the vigor and spontaneity of its style. The Mexican War produced only *Guadeloupe, a Tale of Love and War*, with

merely a slender thread of narrative, which was published anonymously in 1860.

The Civil War was a great spur to the production of narrative verse. In fact, of all the decades in our period, the sixties were the most prolific of good metrical romances. It was then that most of the stories of domestic life were written, all the poems of Holland falling within these limits, and then, too, that much of the work of Longfellow, Whittier, Read, and Bayard Taylor appeared. The first of the Civil War poems was also the best, E. C. Stedman's *Alice of Monmouth*, published in 1864. The plot has no complications, the story of a man whose father has cast him off because of an unsatisfactory marriage. At his bedside, when he is dying of a wound received in brave service in the war, the father meets the wife for the first time, and seeing her beauty and worth, is reconciled. This simple tale is told in verse that has considerable lyric quality, the metre varying to fit the mood. In the next year appeared Read's *Summer Story*, and Dagnall's *Daisy Swain*. In 1867, Holland published his *Mistress of the Manse*, the story of the problems of a Northern husband and a Southern wife. Mrs. Angelica Bishop Barrett's *Linden-Tree Cottage and the Accepted Sacrifice*, 1868, and Isaac M. Inman's *The Captive*, 1870, are two poor verse narratives connected with the same great struggle.

The relations and conflicts of the white men in America with their red-skin neighbors brought forth more poems, however, than any other wars. Powhatan, Tecumseh, and Black Hawk were more popular as heroes than Washington or Grant. In the same year, 1841, Mrs. Sigourney published a poem, *Pocahontas*, and Seba Smith another on the same subject, *Powhatan*, wherein we scarcely recognize our old friend under the distinguished title of "Sir John." *Frontenac*, by A. B. Street, 1849, is a good narrative of this expedition of the French in Canada against the Iroquois. Roger Williams's exile among the Indians is celebrated in *Whatcheer; or Roger Williams in Banishment*, by the Hon. Job Durfee, 1832. King Philip's War furnished the basis of the story of *Yamoyden*, by Eastburn and Sands, and the exploits of Tecumseh, for a long poem called by his name, by George H. Colton, 1842. The Seminole War attracted Lucretia Davidson,

and in her fourteenth year she wrote portions of a narrative poem, *Chicomico*, founded on actual occurrences in Florida; and another poem, *The Ambuscade*, by Thomas R. Whitney, 1845, was written to commemorate the achievements of Zachary Taylor in the battle of O-kee-cho-bee. P. Hamilton Myers's *Ensenore*, 1840, a story of the Indian raid on Schenectady, and Elbert H. Smith's *Ma-Ka-Tai-Me-She-Kia-Kiak; or Black Hawk, and Scenes in the West*, 1849, are two others which are based on historical events connected with the Indians.

The Red Man afforded material for fiction as well as for historical poems, and apart from those tales which, like the above, had a basis of fact, there were many which were pure romance. There was no one subject that was so popular with the writers of narrative verse, and none that remained in favor for so long a time. In fact, as Onderdonk says, "the American Indian had been done to death in numberless epics and dramas."² The culmination was in Longfellow's *Hiawatha*, in 1855, though this was by no means the last word to be written on the subject.

Doubtless the desire to write the "great American epic," which moved many poets, especially during the earlier part of our period, and caused the production of such a work as *The Columbiad*, induced many to try their hands at such an essentially American subject as the Indian. Mrs. Sarah Wentworth Morton, in the introduction to her poem, *Ouabi*, wrote, "I am induced to hope that the attempting a subject wholly American will in some respect entitle me to the partial eye of the patriot." It was this motive which actuated many of those who celebrated the Red Man. The author of *Ensenore* speaks of "a cause which he has much at heart—that of giving more of a national feature to American poetry." It is true that some of these zealous Americans succeeded in giving more of a Scottish or Byronic or classical feature to their poetry, but their motives if not their verse deserve the "partial eye of the patriot."

Ouabi, the first verse-tale with an Indian as the hero, was published in 1790, with the sub-title, "*The Virtues of Nature. An Indian Tale in Four Cantos.* By Philenia, a Lady of Boston."

² James L. Onderdonk, *History of American Verse (1610-1897)*, p. 160. Chicago, 1901.

That she was a pioneer in this kind of writing, "Philenia" knew and admitted in her Introduction. "From an Idea of being original in my subject," she said, "I was induced to undertake the following Tale. The manners and customs of the Aborigines of North America are so limited and simple, that they have scarcely engaged the attention either of the Philosopher or the Poet." I wish that I might reproduce here the frontispiece, for it is as quaint and entertaining as the poem itself. Ouabi is of heroic size, as befits his superior virtue, and his air is quite as grand as the most ardent admirer of the noble savage could desire. In spite of the fact that Azabia, the Indian heroine, seems acquainted with Cynthia and talks in the same terms, and indeed in the same tongue, as the white man, Celario, although he is the first of his race that she has ever seen, there is a conscientious attempt to represent savage manners and customs which somehow carries more conviction with it than some of the later descriptions that pretend to be more accurate.

By the time the next Indian tale appears, in 1820, the influence of Scott has been at work; and the savages in *Yamoyden* show few of the characteristics which we have come to associate with them through the reading of such varied representations as those of Cooper, Simms, and Longfellow. Six years later another element has entered into the picture of the ways of the Red Man. In the Preface to *Wumissoo*, by William Allen, D.D., President of Bowdoin College, the author states his purpose in writing. It is not to represent the ways of the Indians, but "In the following poem it has been the aim of the writer to utter truths and sentiments, which are calculated to enlarge and improve the heart and to ennoble the character." He is merely using the Indian setting to embody a glorification of Christianity and an attack upon Byron. The heroine, a converted Indian, is a poetess. She is counselled by the missionary not to introduce into her hymns such pagan deities as Apollo, the Nymphs, and the Muses, but she does make allusions to the sirens and to Cæsar and Alexander. One of her compositions is a hymn "On the Nativity of Christ," in which she sets herself the task of imitating Milton, as she herself says,—

Th' unequalled bard, who sung of Paradise,
Lost by the rebel act of parent-man.

Not many went to such absurd lengths as this, however. Durfee's *Whatcheer*, though long and tedious, and modelled on the classics, contains nothing so ridiculous. Whittier's *Mogg Megone*, 1834, I have already mentioned among those Indian stories which show the effect of the poems of Scott and Byron, as well as Myers's *Ensenore*, Mrs. Sigourney's *Pocahontas*, and Seba Smith's *Powhatan*. The last of these gives voice to the lament which so many writers were making over the fate of the natives:—

But the warrior race is fading away;
The day of their prowess and glory is past.

Tecumseh; or, The West Thirty Years Since, by George H. Colton, 1842, is interesting both because of its manifest imitation of Scott, and because of the expressed purpose of the author. It is a romance much in the style of Cooper, with pursuits and captures or hair-breadth escapes, for Tecumseh, like another Natty Bumppo, always appears to rescue hero or heroine at the crucial moment. The poem is full of descriptions of scenery, which is part of the object of the writer, as is shown both by the double title and by the words of his preface. He desires, he says, not only to perpetuate the customs of the Indians in general, but to leave to posterity a brief description of the magnificent scenery of the West, and "to exhibit and record the vast efforts of the really great man—savage and untutored though he was—whose name is adopted as the title of this work."

In Whittier's *Bridal of Pennacook*, 1844, we have a simple relation of an Indian legend, a type which was to become popular a little later. In the meanwhile, this development was interrupted by three poems, Whitney's *Ambuscade*, 1845, Street's *Frontenac*, 1849, and, in the same year, Smith's *Black Hawk*, "a useful work, comprehending much in little," all of which belong to that class of Indian poems based on a foundation of history. *Oliatta*, by Howard H. Caldwell, 1855, *Chicora*, by William J. Grayson, 1856, and *Ulah*, by Amanda T. Jones, 1861, are all versified forms of Indian legends. *Hiawatha*, 1855, is too well-known to need description, and too far superior to its predecessors and successors to warrant criticism on the same page. It naturally called forth both parodies and imitations, and

likewise some opposition, as in Benjamin Franklin DeCosta's new version of *Hiawatha: the Story of the Iroquois Sage*, 1873. Although he considers that the great prophet who founded the Confederacy of the Five Nations has not been fairly represented, DeCosta does state quite clearly and accurately the general attitude of the versifiers of America toward the Indian. "It has been the custom of the poet," he says, "to clothe the Red Man in a histrionic garb, and invest him with exaggerated action. In literature he has, therefore, on the whole, had more than his due. The 'Noble' overshadows the 'Poor Indian.'"

Thus, although there were some among the writers of narrative verse in America who felt the lure of the strange foreign lands of which Byron wrote, on the whole they kept to regions nearer home, and satisfied their craving for romance with the unfamiliar elements in the life of the savages of their own continent. A love of their native land inspired even the poorest of them, and they wrote in the spirit of Emerson's words: "All these great and transcendent properties are ours. If we dilate in beholding the Greek energy, the Roman pride, it is that we are already domesticating the same sentiment. Let us find room for this great guest in our small houses. The first step of worthiness will be to disabuse us of our superstitious associations with places and times, with number and size. Why should these words, Athenian, Roman, Asia, and England, so tingle in the ear? Let us feel that where the heart is, there the muses, there the gods sojourn, and not in any geography of fame. Massachusetts, Connecticut River, and Boston Bay, you think paltry places, and the ear loves names of foreign and classic topography. But here we are;—that is a great fact, and, if we tarry a little, we may come to learn that here is best."³

It must be remembered, however, that most of these poets wrote to meet the demand of the reading public for something epic, something national, and rarely does a poem produced under such circumstances rise to real greatness. Moreover, the great majority of them were imitating English models, and imitative poetry almost inevitably has many faults. These two facts,

³ *Heroism. Essays; First Series.*

together with an obvious absence of literary technique, help to account for the mediocre quality and lack of artistic value of much of the narrative poetry of America. Yet it was on these foundations that the greater poets built. *Evangeline* was a response to the demand for something which should embody the national traditions, rather than an imitation of the verse-romances across the water. So these smaller figures in the development of American poetry gain somewhat in importance in being the men on whose shoulders poets like Longfellow and Whittier climbed. Nevertheless, in spite of the national impulse and the native traditions, the fact remains that the writer of the "great American epic" is still unborn. No Vergil has appeared to comply with the command of the sovereign people of the United States.

ELIZABETH NITCHIE.

New York City.